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SUBJECT: Algeria Media Reaction to Algeria's Reported Inclusion in TSA List of Countries of Concern

#### SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Media reports that the Transportation Security Administration had included Algeria as one of fourteen "countries of concern" has sparked a myriad of negative reactions from the Algerian press and an obsessive focus on this issue that shows little sign of abating. In fact, the issue has replaced the Algerian-Egyptian politico-media dispute since the two countries' soccer teams vied for qualification in the World Cup tournament and the slow arrival of H1N1 vaccines as the top continuous story. The abundant commentary ranges from damaging analogies comparing the lumping of all Algerians into a terrorist category to lumping all Americans into the rapist category (a reference to the 2008 Andrew Warren case), to supplanting "Obamania" for "Obabushism." The media response may have provoked more hurt feelings than anything else from Algerians. Algerians see themselves as our allies in the struggle against terror but believed that the Obama administration would bring improved relations between our countries. TSA's announcement has strongly diminished those sentiments -- a blow that is felt by not only the government but also by average Algerians.  
END SUMMARY

#### COVERAGE

12. (U) Coverage of TSA's reported inclusion of Algeria began immediately after the story first appeared in the New York Times on January 4, 2010. On day one, there were few headlines, but by day two every major and minor newspaper had reported on the issue. Many of the articles focused on the alleged discriminatory and racist nature of the decision and the hypocrisy of the United States. Algerian Ambassador to the U.S. Abdallah Baali reportedly made the rounds in Washington denouncing the decision. With President Bouteflika and his foreign minister in Spain, one newspaper suggested caustically that the MFA should take a dose of Viagra to stand up to the USG. After Algerian Foreign Minister Medelci summoned Ambassador Pearce on January 11, 2010, coverage increased and consumed Algerian mass media. This coverage coincided with the French announcement of heightened aviation security measures to complement its decision to include Algeria on a list of "countries at risk." Algerian newspapers carried the Algerian MFA's announcement that it had delivered a protest over the TSA list. In response to one newspaper's claim that FM Medelci had been subjected to special security screening at Dulles International Airport when he visited in December 2009, the same paper ran, in tiny print, an official MFA statement denying that any such incident had occurred. Interestingly, the MFA's statement on the January 18 phone call between Medelci and Secretary Clinton did not mention TSA as a topic of discussion, a point criticized by some newspapers that suggested the MFA was again not being tough enough with Washington.

13. (U) On January 12, PAO conducted a background meeting with several journalists to explain the reasoning behind the measures. Coverage immediately following the meeting was reasonably accurate and balanced, noting particularly that the U.S. was in no way targeting Algerians with these measures, but rather trans-national terrorists who pose a threat to Algeria as well as the U.S.

14. (U) However, the respite did not last, and within a couple of

days the outrage was back in full swing in the media, spurred in no small part by radio and TV interviews with FM Medelci, who referred to the measures as "humiliating" and "inappropriate." Medelci did, however, affirm that the GOA was committed to dialogue with the U.S. to rectify the situation. (Note: LES have commented that they cannot remember the last time such a high-ranking GOA official had conducted two interviews in one week.) SecState's phone call to the FM on January 18 to further discuss the issue received limited but positive coverage that highlighted both sides' commitment to working together to overcome misunderstandings and reinforce cooperation.

15. (U) In order to signal positive recognition of the progress Algeria has made in fighting terrorism, AMB paid a visit on January 20 to Ain Defla, a region that has in the past been one of the most troubled by terrorist activity. The visit played widely in the press as a significant gesture of acknowledgement of Algeria's efforts. However, while the gesture was well-appreciated by the press, it also further emphasized what they see as a contradiction in our stance towards Algeria. The most telling headline read, "The Embarrassment of the American Ambassador: He visits Ain Delfa but Justifies the Black List" (Liberte, January 21).

16. (U) Following the visit of NEA DAS Sanderson to Algiers January 23-25, coverage of the TSA issue took a more positive turn. Her statement to the press that, "the list of countries of concern is constantly being reviewed," was widely interpreted by the press as meaning Algeria would be removed from the list soon. While not an accurate portrayal of her words, it did take some heat off the issue. Within a few days, coverage of the issue had fallen to a trickle, and within a week was largely absent from the media as the advance of Algeria's national team to the semi-finals of the Africa Cup of Nations football tournament drew attention from most other

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stories.

17. (U) On February 3, a few days after the tournament ended, Minister of Interior Zerhouni made a statement that Algeria was considering applying reciprocity to U.S. travelers, and that announcement brought the story back to the front pages of most Algerian newspapers.

18. (U) On February 4, PAS hosted a press round table with the visiting Deputy Coordinator for Programs and Policy in the Secretary's Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, which received widespread coverage in the Algerian press. She spent a significant portion of the time addressing TSA-related questions. Coverage was factual and based mostly on the article disseminated by the government-owned press agency, APS, which highlighted the strong counterterrorism partnership between Algeria and the United States. Other newspapers widely reported that the TSA list might be reviewed. "Liberte", a French-language newspaper that has been among the most critical of the new screening measures imposed by TSA, considered this visit another attempt by the U.S. to appease Algeria. Nonetheless, it appears to have worked, as coverage of the issue since then has been scant.

#### EDITORIAL

19. (U) Since the announcement of the list, editorials from major publications in French and Arabic mentioned that the new security measures would generate and in some cases reinforce anti-Americanism among Muslims. They also wrote that the measures were hurtful, maintaining that Algerian pride and dignity had been offended and that the measures were another humiliation. They also emphasized the failure of Algeria's diplomacy in improving Algeria's image by securing redress. State-run newspapers emphasized Algerian Ambassador Baali's intention to file a complaint against TSA's measures and the interviews with FM Medelci. One of the starkest headlines stated, "Paris and Washington are punishing the people of other countries to hide the failure of their intelligence services." ("El Khabar," 1/10)

#### COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Many Public Affairs contacts tell us that it is less about Algeria being on a special list and more about the publicity and the group of countries with which Algeria is being associated. There is also the embarrassment factor, as Algerians had been led to believe, especially from the almost gushing coverage of AFRICOM Commander General Ward's visit in late November, that the bilateral relationship with Washington was dramatically improving. DAS Sanderson and other Embassy officials have reiterated that TSA measures were intended to respond to a vulnerability to our aviation security system and were not meant to single out Algeria or affect the bilateral relationship. That, however, is not the prevailing press story. The Algerian press has been mobilized on this issue and will likely continue to cover the issue situation until it is somehow resolved.

PEARCE